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C.I.A. Wants to Enlist Nicaraguan Indians

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Miskitos Are Arguing With Themselves

By JAMES LEMOYNE

SO far they have played a bit part in the guerrilla campaign against the Nicaraguan Government, but there are big plans for the Miskito Indians. Central Intelligence Agency operatives and Nicaraguan guerrilla leaders are active at Mocoron and other refugee camps in the swampy lowlands of north-eastern Honduras along the border, plotting strategy and drumming up support among the estimated 17,500 Miskitos who have fled Sandinista rule and the prospect of a more punishing war. Several Miskito leaders have even flown to Washington in the last two weeks to discuss their role in the American-backed war. Reagan Administration officials say they hope the Indians will open an active front with other rebel units, to cut off Nicaragua's Atlantic coast and declare it a liberated zone.

When seen from ground level in Honduras, however, such plans seem ambitious. The Miskitos are torn by internal disputes and seem increasingly uncertain of their future. Several told a recent visitor that they were worried that they might never be able to return to Nicaragua. Some Indian leaders said they fear that their people could become like the Hmong and Meo tribesmen in Asia — indigenous people drafted into a war by the C.I.A. and later abandoned. "They don't know what to do," said an



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international relief official. "If they stay in Honduras they are refugees. If they go back to Nicaragua they may have to fight or be persecuted for not fighting."

The Miskitos are no strangers to hardship and hard choices. Most of them fled from Nicaragua in 1982 after a number of violent incidents led the Sandinistas to burn Indian villages and force-march several thousand Miskitos into Government camps. The vast majority of Miskitos still appear to hate the Sandinistas. The Sandinistas allowed the Indians to go home earlier this year, but most crossed back into Honduras in April after the Sandinistas clashed with Indian guerrillas.

Life is also hard in the steaming refugee camps, where young men are pressured to become guerrillas. The situation is made more difficult by a longstanding

power struggle among the exiles that reflects political as well as personal differences. The dominant Indian group in Honduras, known as Kisan, has perhaps 1,000 men and is allied to the American-backed rebel organization, the United Nicaraguan Opposition. A number of Kisan combatants were accused of human rights abuses, such as killing prisoners, more than a year ago.

Another group known as Misurasata is based in Costa Rica and led by Brooklyn Rivera. Perhaps because Mr. Rivera has been willing to negotiate with the Sandinistas, he has been deported from Honduras and says his life was threatened by Col. Enrique Bermudez, the military head of the rebel Nicaraguan Democratic Force.

In a rare visit to Honduras a few weeks ago, however, Mr. Rivera was allowed to travel to a few Indian

camp. He was spurned by top Kisan officials but at the main Indian refugee camp in Mocoron several hundred Miskitos cheered as he criticized his compatriots for lack of organization and weak leadership. When he said he had previously been barred from Honduras, his listeners murmured angrily. When he argued that their fight should be based not only on anti-Communism, but also on Indian autonomy and territorial claims, they applauded. They overwhelmingly supported Mr. Rivera's call for an assembly to select new leaders. Only a few young members of the Kisan group objected; they appeared to be treated with disdain by most of the other Indians present.

The Kisan group, however, does enjoy a measure of support. More importantly, a war is being planned and Mr. Rivera will not easily fit into the plans. Arturo Cruz, one of the directors of the overall rebel movement, said after meeting Mr. Rivera in Honduras that he would argue for the continuation of separate Miskito organizations, one led by Kisan and one led by Mr. Rivera. Another top rebel official said Mr. Rivera should be kept out of Honduras because "he will make trouble."

"Kisan intimidates people," Mr. Rivera said. "It persecutes, menaces and imprisons its opponents."

"We will never accept Brooklyn as a leader again," countered Morris Edwards of Kisan. "He is a Communist and a traitor to the Miskitos."

The dispute is likely to become more ugly as the Indians step up a recruiting drive that has already led to accusations of human rights violations. At least 26 refugees have been seized by Indian guerrillas in the last two months, according to several witnesses who complain that those who do not support Kisan are treated as enemies. "They have come here and warned us against opposing them," said a refugee in the village of Tapanlaya. "Maybe some of us will be taken; we aren't sure."

The Miskitos face a decidedly uncertain future even if the rebel war against Nicaragua should succeed. They have called for territorial and political autonomy, a demand that neither the Sandinistas nor any alternative Nicaraguan government is likely to accept. As Indians and as refugees, the Miskitos' future looks harsh. More and more, they seem to know it.

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